
EVOLUTION

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“But words are things, and a small drop of ink, Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think.”

– Lord Byron

When I was eight years old in 1973, prior to public law 94-142, my parents and the school system both were convinced that something was amiss with the way I responded to academic and social settings. The consensus was that the information I was receiving and expressing was different from that of other children my age. It was as if I was stuck in a well, grasping for a way to communicate with the world above me.

The first rescue attempt to address my speech difficulties came from Easter Seals, followed by another attempt from Astoria Park, an elementary school that worked with a large number of students with disabilities. In 1975 when PL 94-142 was enacted, I was rapidly merged into pods with other students who were also experiencing difficulty. These “special student” pods carried groups of students from one class to another to receive individualized services.

From 1975 until I graduated from high school in 1985, my experiences as a student with a disability paralleled the history of special education. The system was doing its best to accommodate for my language disability; however, no one, including my parents, was able to communicate with me about what was going on inside my brain. This silence left gaps in the understanding of my learning style, and ultimately plagued my self-worth.

After years of special education and tutoring programs, I received special entrance through developmental studies to the University of Georgia where I finally started to confront and understand my disabilities. At age 21 and a senior at the University of Georgia, I poured myself into a one-year writing frenzy, which released intense feelings of anger, vulnerability, and honesty about my learning disabilities. With Dr.

Rosemary Jackson, my college tutor, at the keyboard, I took to the floor divulging specific details about my life difficulties and experiences. During these evening writing sessions we began to conquer my inner demons, which had chewed away at my self-worth for so many years. Looking back, I now recognize that I was attempting to obtain a grasp on how I perceive, learn, remember, and think about simple and complex bits of information, thus assisting me in ascertaining the interaction between the components of my brain.

I became obsessed with how and why my brain sequenced information differently than others. As I explored the workings of my brain, answers to questions about my disabilities were clarified and became more authentic. Instead of reading and hearing about theories regarding my unique cognitive pathways, I followed brain-imaging research, which allowed me to understand the activity, or lack of activity, occurring within me. Through exploring literature on child development I got glimpses into some of my difficulties as a toddler. For instance, as a young child I was very emotional and had an active temper that seemed to surpass that of other children. This greatly concerned my parents. In discussions about that period of my life, my parents expressed that they were aware that under the surface something was causing me extreme frustration.

Since then, brain studies have shown that active language development happens around 18 months of age in specific areas of the brain, including the development of the Wernick’s area, which confers understanding, and matures before the Broca’s area, where the brain produces speech. The delay in maturity between the two parts of the brain triggers a short stretch when toddlers understand more than they can say, causing a frustrating state that most likely does much to stimulate the tantrums that symbolize the Terrible Twos. Since I did not speak until I was three years old, this explains why my “Terrible Twos” became the “Terrible Twos and Threes.”

Brain research became one of my passions. As a result, I submerged myself in cognitive therapy, which by definition involves talking and thinking about emotions, and ultimately allowed me to take control of my disabilities. In some ways, I had also become a student of structuralism, which involves analyzing consciousness into its constituent components of elementary sensations, using the reflective self-observation technique of introspection. This period of introspection was not unlike that of so many others who have labored over the written and spoken word. Wilhelm Wundt, the German psychologist, had no great success in school, failing repeatedly, and frequently finding himself subject to the ridicule of others. However, he later showed that school performance does not always predict career success, as he went on to become the father of structuralism and one of the most influential psychologists of all time.

Before I left the University of Georgia and co-authored the book *Faking It* (Lee & Jackson, 1992), which was the outcome of the long writing sessions with my tutor, I had confronted and dealt with most of my demons. I commonly refer to this stage of my life as my reconstruction period. During this time, my emotions were intense, and blame for my lack of ability to learn ran rampant. Nevertheless, taking this time to reflect was vital to my emotional growth, helping to shed unwanted and unnecessary feelings that were holding me back from academic, employment and emotional success. Today, as an adult with learning disabilities, I have learned to manage my language and memory barriers through assistive technology and outside support. And I nourish my self-confidence through therapy or simply surrounding myself with family and friends who understand my innovative use of language.

In addition to dealing with the emotional aspects of having a learning disability, I incorporated a personal action plan into my life soon after graduating from college. In my first job, I was unable to perform my duties due to the loss of my collegiate support team. My personal action plan eventually came to include standard tools, modifications and accommodations of task and expectations, and assistive technology.

Looking back on the process, I realize that I pulled much of my inspiration and creative solutions from individuals with physical disabilities who had similar limitations. These individuals became a vital source for how to approach the barriers that limit independence. After watching, listening, and mimicking individuals with physical limitations, I adopted early on such assistive technology resources as screen reading software, voice dictation and recognition software, and other products developed for individuals with sensory and physical limitations. Today, individuals with disabilities

have access to assistive technology through legislation, including the Assistive Technology Act of 1998. This law affirms that technology is a valuable tool for improving the lives of Americans with disabilities. It also affirms the federal role in funding and promoting access to assistive technology devices and services for individuals with disabilities.

Another important tool I have used to deal with my daily language barriers is maintaining a sense of humor. Humor is one approach you will probably never see on an individualized education program (IEP) or individual work plan (IWP); however, it is a powerful tool. Individuals with learning disabilities need humor throughout their daily lives. The ability to laugh at oneself is a valuable coping skill and survival mechanism. It took a long time before I was able to laugh about my blunders. But I was fortunate to have parents who felt comfortable in their own skins and found humor as a way to teach us about life.

One of my aspirations is to encourage service providers to incorporate humor throughout their lesson or work plans. Teaching students or clients through example that it is okay to laugh at mistakes means less energy spent on hiding and more energy focused on learning. In my own experience, I send out a risqué email that highlights my difficulty with syntax. I have written phrases such as "I was messing around with my secretary." At other times I have had trouble finding the right word, once replacing *Echinacea* with *euthanasia*. If you labor with language, you had better be able to cope with the teasing and puzzled looks you will encounter, and what better way to deal with these blunders than to smile to yourself.

Although specific strategies and behavior modifications can be implemented for individual success, much is still needed at a national and state level to improve the future of individuals with learning disabilities. In 2002, The President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education released its report, "A New Era: Revitalizing Special Education for Children and Their Families." The Commission found that more students with disabilities are unemployed and underemployed upon leaving school than their peers who do not have disabilities. Too many students with disabilities leave school without successfully earning any type of diploma, and they attend postsecondary programs at rates lower than their nondisabled peers. Further, adults with disabilities are much less likely to be employed than are adults without disabilities. Unemployment rates for working-age adults with disabilities have hovered at the 70% level for the past 12 years. Even when employed, too many adults with disabilities earn markedly less than their nondisabled peers. Based on these findings, the Commission has recommended that

the Rehabilitation Services Administration immediately begin to work collaboratively with the Office of Special Education Programs to improve services for students with disabilities.

Through my observations and work with adolescents and adults who have either dropped out or made it through the system, I continue to see the same trends that affect individuals' lives negatively. A lack of effective self-advocacy, financial planning, goal setting, and task completion skills, coupled with a proclivity toward codependent relationships and imbedded self-esteem issues, continues to plague individuals with learning disabilities. Future research and services must focus on these areas.

Today, neuropsychologists are helping to provide answers to cognition. Over time, this information will

slowly funnel its way into academic and employment settings. The landscape of the brain is one of the most important areas of training for individuals with learning disabilities, parents, service providers, and employers. Through such newfound research and understanding, the field of learning disabilities will evolve to new heights in providing services and teaching students and employees. As more specifics on the workings of the brain emerge, a shift in education will occur, which will help define and unify the voices of individuals with learning disabilities.

REFERENCES

Lee, C., & Jackson, R. (1992). *Faking it: A look into the mind of a creative learner*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Press.